

Opponent Testimony for Senate Bill 1

Presented to The Workforce and Higher Education Committee Members

March 11, 2025

Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio and members of the committee:

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share my testimony in opposition of Senate Bill 1.

My name is Michele Harkins and I am the parent of a daughter age 28 with a rare genetic disability known as Williams Syndrome. Williams Syndrome occurs in an estimated 1 in every 10,000 births in the United States. Williams Syndrome is present at birth and can affect anyone. It is characterized by medical problems, including cardiovascular disease, developmental delays and learning challenges. These often occur side by side with striking verbal abilities, highly social personalities and an affinity for music. She has battled since 2015 after graduating from high school to find a workplace where she "fits in" and is able to use her strengths while gaining job skills. In April of 2021, she finally found the place where she was able to do this, Opportunities Unleashed/Barks and Rec Doggie Daycare, a nonprofit organization dedicated to job training and supportive employment for individuals with disabilities.

Through an on the job training program which allowed her to gain job skills as well as self-confidence and self esteem, she was hired as a part time employee and works the front desk greeting customers and welcoming dogs with her overly friendly personality. Her self esteem is amazing and there is never a day that she is not excited to go to work. It took 4 programs and/or workplaces to find a fit for her and this has been wonderful. She is able to have some independence, work and make a little money too.

This legislation, as currently written, threatens to undermine the existing pathways that help individuals with disabilities transition into the workforce by limiting access to training programs and employment supports that have proven successful. Many individuals with disabilities such as Williams Syndrome thrive in structured, skill-based learning environments that offer hands-on job training and work-based learning opportunities. These programs whether through community colleges, vocational training centers or partnerships with employers are critical in helping individuals with disabilities gain independence, develop confidence and contribute meaningfully to society.

SB 1 however would create unnecessary barriers by restricting funding and accessibility to these essential services. One of the biggest challenges for individuals with Williams

Syndrome is navigating the transition from education to employment. Programs like Opportunities Unleashed provide critical supports such as job coaching, workplace accommodations and social skills training all of which are services that traditional workforce programs often do not offer or fully understand. If SB 1 moves forward, it could disrupt this process leaving people with disabilities and Williams Syndrome fewer opportunities and greater uncertainty about their futures. In addition, businesses across Ohio are benefitting from the inclusion of employees with disabilities.

As a parent I have seen the potential my daughter has when provided appropriate support. As an advocate I have witnessed the success that she has had these past four years and see and hear of the successes of others with developmental disabilities who have been able to find meaningful employment through specialized job training programs. SB 1 jeopardizes these successes by restricting access to the very resources that make them possible. I urge you to consider the impact this bill would have on Ohioans with disabilities and to prioritize policies that expand rather than limit opportunities for our community.

PLEASE VOTE NO on SB 1 and work with stakeholders to develop legislation that truly supports ALL Ohioans in achieving meaningful employment.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Michele Harkins

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